

P 310556Z AUG 05
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8684
INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 001915

STATE FOR NEA (GRAY), NEA/MAG (WILLIAMS, LAWRENCE), NEA/PPD (FERNANDEZ, SMITH AGNEW), NEA/PI (MULENEX, KIRBY), NEA/PA, NEA/IP, I/GNA, DRL, CWG-PD, EB/CIP (SHIPMAN)
NSC FOR KSHAP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/26/2015
TAGS: [KPAOPHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [OIIP](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN JOURNALISTS REACT NEGATIVELY TO NEW FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: TUNIS 1805

Classified By: Amb. William J Hudson; reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) Summary. Per reftel, on August 17, President Ben Ali made the surprise appointment of presidential counselor Adelwaheb Abdallah to the post of Foreign Minister. Having long served as the de-facto Minister of Information and widely believed to be one of the forces behind the GOT's strict control over the media, Abdallah's move out of the palace and to the forefront of Tunisian diplomacy has given rise to much discussion of the reasons for the change. Conversations with a wide variety of media professionals reveal that while Tunisian journalists disagree about the real reason behind the appointment, they generally remain pessimistic that there is hope for an end to the widespread censorship that defines the Tunisian media environment. End Summary.

2.(C) On August 18 Tunisian newspapers announced that President Ben Ali had appointed one of his closest veteran advisors, Abdelwaheb Abdallah, as Foreign Minister. His decision took all observers by surprise, since Abdallah has spent the last fifteen years in the Palace, where he oversaw all aspects of information in the country, to include the appointment of editors and directors, licensing (or failure to license) new newspapers, and even the editorial and news content of the daily newspapers. A journalist by background, Abdallah has little experience in areas of international relations, except for two years as Ambassador to London.

3.(C) Over the past week, Embassy personnel spoke to eight journalists of varied political allegiances about this issue. According to these journalists, Abdallah was appointed to the post of Foreign Minister due to President Ben Ali's belief that he was the correct person to manage foreign relations up to and during the November World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS) scheduled to take place in Tunis. Several of them advanced the idea that Ben Ali has been so impressed with Abdallah's ability to control information inside Tunisia that it was a natural progression to place his master propagandist at the Foreign Ministry. Those journalists, however, agreed that this was a miscalculation on the President's part, as it is widely known that Abdallah is held in low esteem by those Tunisians and foreign diplomats who are cognizant of his role in suppressing freedom of the press in the country. Another theory expressed was that Abdallah was being set up for a fall, with some journalists speculating that this move may have been made to distance Abdallah from the President at a time when freedom of the press is constantly raised by international observers.

4.(C) Several of the journalists noted the dismay with which this appointment was met at the government media outlets and at the government-run journalism university, IPSI. One said that the IPSI faculty, while disgusted with the state of the press in Tunisia, counted on Abdallah for continued support and funding of the university. (Note: Abdallah is a former

professor at IPSI. End Note.) Another wondered how the government media would go on without the daily instructions that had been provided by Abdallah to their editors and journalists. One editor at a government newspaper alluded to these close relations when he laughingly referred to his colleagues as "Abdallah's orphans" who would be lost without their patron; he also reported that the day that Abdallah moved to the Foreign Ministry, there were more journalists than diplomats in his office. (Note: One journalist reported that he was specifically summoned to the Foreign Ministry by Presidential Press Attache Lamjet Hamdani, who told him that Abdallah wanted to arrive to the Foreign Ministry surrounded by journalists. This same journalist opined that this was done to underline Abdallah's powerful position for his new colleagues at the MFA. He also reported that, when he saw Abdallah, he asked him directly if this meant the end of his work on information issues in the country; Abdallah reportedly replied, "Never." End Note.)

5.(C) All the journalists agreed that Abdallah's move outside of the palace walls would naturally diminish his influence over the President and that his new portfolio would keep him so busy that he could no longer directly interfere in the working of the Tunisian media. That said, none of them felt that this move would alleviate existing control over their profession. They cited the important role that editors and directors -- all of whom are loyal to Abdallah -- play in ensuring that government redlines are strictly observed. They concluded that, with or without Abdallah, journalists would still not enjoy any margin of liberty in their reporting. Some thought that Abdallah's former staff (including Presidential Press Attache Lamjet Hamdani and Presidential Press Counselor Mehdi Hattab) would remain active in the palace, providing usual daily instruction to newspapers.

6.(C) When asked if the Tunisian Journalists Association viewed this as an opportunity for a new opening in the press, one of its leaders indicated that the pro-government leadership was unlikely to challenge what is widely seen as President Ben Ali's decision to control the media. The journalists believe that, while Abdallah was often vilified as the sole controller of all information in the country, he was in reality no more than a spoke in the wheel of media control that will continue to turn even after his move to the Foreign Ministry. All of the journalists advanced the idea that President Ben Ali is the person responsible for lack of freedom of expression in this country and whether through Abdallah or the Ministry of Interior, the press will remain muzzled.

7.(C) Comment. While it is probable that Abdallah was moved to the MFA to ensure the success of Tunisia's role in the WSIS, it is also possible that Ben Ali is trying to send a sign to outside observers that the Palace will no longer be controlling the press. Despite journalists' pessimism, we hope that Abdallah's new position as Foreign Minister will provide multiple new opportunities to raise the mission priority of free press in Tunisia with the one person (other than the President) who is most responsible for the sad situation of the media in the country.

HUDSON